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Addendum

Summary

This addendum to the annual report on evaluation 2017 (DP/2018/12) provides a brief analysis of actions that UNDP has agreed to carry out in response to evaluation recommendations from the Independent Evaluation Office. The analysis highlights significant gaps in the management response tracking and reporting system that make it difficult to determine whether promised actions are taking place and achieving results. The report sets out a series of steps that the Independent Evaluation Office is taking to establish guidelines, improve tracking systems and deepen the analysis of management response action implementation and results.

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I. Introduction

1. This addendum to the annual report on evaluation 2017 provides a brief review of the status of evaluation management response action implementation at UNDP. The review highlights gaps in the management response tracking system and references practices at other United Nations organizations in order to underscore the need for a more dedicated approach to management response action follow-up at UNDP. The analysis covers 62 evaluations carried out by the Independent Evaluation Office (IEO) between 2012 and 2016, and includes a more detailed analysis of a representative sample of these evaluations. The review also considers the current management response uploading and tracking features of the Evaluation Resource Centre (ERC).[1]

2. The Independent Evaluation Office has carried out the review in response to the Executive Board request that it pay greater attention to the implementation of management response actions, recognizing that a critical component of its oversight function is not just the production of assessments, but also whether evaluations are helping improve UNDP results.[2]

3. Since the adoption of the first evaluation policy in 2006, the Executive Board has consistently stressed the importance of ensuring that management responses are provided for all evaluations.[3] Periodically, the Board has requested that UNDP report on its progress in "implementing the evaluation recommendations" of specific evaluations and on "follow-up to management responses" in general.[4] UNDP has complied with such Board requests, most recently in its report to the Board on the implementation of recommendations of the evaluation of UNDP contribution to poverty reduction (DP/2016/26). UNDP has also noted in its strategic planning efforts that it has considered the findings, conclusions and recommendations from evaluations carried out by the Independent Evaluation Office, including multiple references to evaluation findings in its Strategic Plan, 2018-2021.

4. Through its annual reports on evaluation, the Independent Evaluation Office has catalogued a high rate of management response production, regularly above 90 per cent.[5] Yet it has been less successful in implementing the planned actions set out in these management responses. The reporting of actions in response to IEO evaluation recommendations has been haphazard, and scant evidence has been provided as to whether planned actions have been completed, whether they have resulted in changes to operations and programming, and whether they have led to improved performance and results. Reporting on management response actions has not been a high priority under UNDP results-based management structures, and there are insufficient guidelines in place for tracking and reporting on management response actions.

5. The Independent Evaluation Office is now working with UNDP management to more systematically assess and report on the results of actions taken in response to IEO recommendations.[6] As first steps in this effort, the office is enhancing the tracking and reporting tools of the Evaluation Resource Centre to better track management response actions and results. It is also developing new UNDP evaluation guidelines to clarify response action reporting requirements; the office will provide detailed analyses of management response actions and their results in subsequent IEO annual reports on evaluation. These steps should lead to improvements in the quality and utility of evaluation recommendations, and more realistic planning of actions in response. Ultimately, this effort should lead to improved UNDP performance and results.

[1] The Evaluation Resource Centre is a searchable, publicly accessible repository of all UNDP, United Nations Capital Development Fund and United Nations Volunteers evaluations, and respective management responses and resulting actions (erc.undp.org).
[2] Executive Board decision 2010/15.
[3] Executive Board decisions 2010/15 and 2015/8.
[4] Executive Board decisions 2008/17, 2009/23, 2012/2 and 2015/17.
[5] Document DP/2012/20, paragraph 26.
[6] Annual report of evaluation 2016, paragraph 34.

II. Review findings

Current management response procedures provide broad guidelines for follow-up and reporting on the implementation of actions in response to IEO evaluation recommendations, without strict or systematic oversight.

6. UNDP evaluation management response procedures were defined by a 2009 guidance note prepared by the Executive Office in consultation with Independent Evaluation Office. The guidance note sets out the UNDP management and staff roles and responsibilities in the follow-up process after an IEO evaluation has been drafted, and includes the management response drafting and action implementation reporting requirements. The guidance note was posted on the IEO intranet, but received limited attention and has not been updated. The UNDP Handbook on Planning, Monitoring and Evaluating for Development Results, developed in 2009 and revised in 2011, notes the importance of management responses and includes, as its annex 6, a template for management responses that remains in use. It does not otherwise discuss or detail the process of tracking and reporting on management response actions. The handbook discussion on management response is primarily focused on decentralized evaluations, with only fleeting reference to management response requirements when the Independent Evaluation Office evaluates.

7. Management response development and the carrying out of actions in response to evaluation recommendations is the responsibility of the UNDP entity being evaluated: country offices, regional bureaux and management at UNDP headquarters. Responsibility for overall tracking of such efforts lies with the evaluation focal points in each of the regional and headquarters bureaux, coordinated through the Development Impact Group within the Bureau for Policy and Programmed Support (BPPS). BPPS has tracked overall compliance with the requirement to produce management responses of IEO evaluations, and periodically sends reminders for evaluation focal points to update management response action status.

While UNDP is meeting its objective to produce management responses for all IEO evaluations, the implementation and reporting on planned actions is weak.

8. IEO analysis of the implementation of actions in response to recommendations, as contained in the 62 evaluations conducted between 2012 and 2016, show that the production of management responses for IEO evaluations is over 90 per cent. It is important to note, however, that the uploading of final management responses to the Evaluation Resource Centre database has been inconsistent. Eight (13 per cent) of IEO evaluations reviewed did not have management responses available on the ERC website at the time of this analysis.[7] Having a management response online and publicly available makes a difference. In six (out of eight) of the evaluations without an online management response, no key actions were identified or taken.

9. The posting of a management response to the Evaluation Resource Centre is only the first step. Subsequent steps are expected in order to implement the agreed actions, and periodically update the response to indicate actions taken. Here, however, the system brakes down. Fifty-four IEO evaluations with completed management responses were reviewed; combined, they yielded 877 actions in response to 392 recommendations. Just over half of the proposed actions (487) were marked complete; 84 were overdue, 35 were not initiated, and 16 were marked as "no longer relevant". The remaining 255 actions (29 per cent) were marked as either ongoing without due date or initiated with no further information. It is currently not possible to validate the timing of management response updates posted online, because the uploading procedures in the Evaluation Resource Centre capture only the last input of data; previous entries are not saved.

Status of key actions	Number of key actions	Percentage
Completed	487	55%
Overdue	84	10%
Not initiated	35	4%
Marked as no longer relevant	16	2%

[7] One of the eight evaluations had a partially completed management response online.

Initiated or ongoing without due date	255	29%
Total	**877**	**100%**

Reporting through the Evaluation Resource Centre on the status of management response actions is haphazard and may underestimate what is taking place.

10. An in-depth analysis of 10 representative evaluations show that country offices and bureaux typically stop updating the status of action implementation after a year, counting from the completion date of an evaluation. Persons interviewed were not aware that a longer duration for tracking management response actions was expected, nor were they aware that the Evaluation Resource Centre has been set up to track the status of actions for up to five years. The focal points suggested that the implementation of actions is significantly higher than what is being reported in the Evaluation Resource Centre, with some stating their performance surpasses 80 per cent, and that their offices are following up on management response action completion during quarterly programming meetings.

11. In its reporting to the Board in 2016 on the midterm review of the previous UNDP Strategic Plan, 2014-2017, UNDP presented achievements under the integrated results and resources framework, including implementation rates of agreed actions on evaluation management responses to IEO evaluations. The implementation rate was reported as 82 per cent in 2014 and 83.5 per cent in 2015.[8] Such a large gap between what has been recorded in the Evaluation Resource Centre and what has been otherwise reported by offices and bureaux through the integrated results and resources framework needs further analysis and validation, and suggests the need for clearer guidance and refined ERC tracking tools.

12. The ways in which UNDP engages with partner governments can add complexity to management response action implementation. Focal points noted they sometimes found it difficult to set strict deadlines for actions, as there can be a series of subactions at the project or programme level needed in response to an action in the management response reporting matrix. In such cases, deadlines are sometimes arbitrarily set to conform to when the programme expects most of the essential steps in the overall action to be completed. In one example, a recommendation called for ensuring that project documents included an outcome matrix which should derive from the country programme's planned outcomes. To fully implement the recommendation, the office felt it needed to wait until all current projects in process had run their course, so that all projects in the portfolio met the requirement. This took years, as there were several multi-year projects, so the status of this action remained 'ongoing'.

UNDP does not systematically track or assess programme and operational improvements resulting from IEO evaluations.

13. There is very little information available on what changes have been made to UNDP programmes and operational systems in response to IEO evaluation recommendations, and no analyses have been carried out that gauge the impact of actions taken in response to IEO evaluations. Other than periodic anecdotal evidence of lessons learned through evaluation, captured in the results-oriented annual reporting exercise, there has been no systematic effort to determine whether actions in response to IEO evaluations have led to changes in programming, operations and performance. The main BPPS evaluation-related tracking and reporting has been aimed at decentralized evaluation functions carried out by programme and country offices. Within this scope, they have done some analysis of country office perceptions on the utility of decentralized evaluation recommendations.

14. In a few cases reviewed, it was stated that recommendations led to adjustments in planning focus and programme structures, as well as the formulation of new strategies. When prompted, evaluation focal points interviewed mentioned that the UNDP results-oriented annual reporting system includes a 'lessons learned from evaluations' section, which demonstrates a UNDP commitment to integrating evaluations into programming and planning. Also, UNDP country offices are required to report on lessons learned from evaluation when developing their next country programme documents. One interviewee explained that the programmes did learn lessons from evaluations, but resulting changes were mostly at the aggregate level, and it was difficult to pinpoint which lessons or what changes derived from a specific evaluation had led to specific outcomes or impacts.

[8] UNDP integrated results and resources framework methodology and 2015 results, document DP/2016/9, annex 2, section 3.2, p. 62.

While UNDP has established a robust, independent evaluation function, other United Nations organizations are further advanced when it comes to management response action implementation and reporting.

15. Other organizations make it compulsory for senior level officials to be fully involved in the implementation and tracking of actions against evaluation recommendations. In the United Nations Secretariat, the implementation of oversight recommendations from the Office of Internal Oversight Services is rated and included in the Under-Secretary-General's compact. Every department reviews its achievements once a year, through reporting on the Under-Secretary-General's compact. Working level updates of action implementation status is once every three months. As another example, the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) reviews the implementation of actions in response to evaluation recommendations quarterly, and a summary report is developed, with breakdown information on each office/programme, containing evaluation budget information, progress made against evaluation plans, and the percentage of completed/closed recommendations. This summative report is circulated to the UNICEF Executive Director and all heads of offices.

The Evaluation Resource Centre is a well-integrated platform of evaluation information, yet it is not set up to effectively monitor the implementation of management response actions.

16. The Evaluation Resource Centre stands out as a leading evaluation platform within the United Nations system, in terms of integration and user-friendliness, as compared with technical platforms used by other United Nations evaluation offices. It is a one-stop-shop of all data, including evaluation reports, quality ratings of decentralized evaluations, evaluation focal points at all programme levels, and posting of management responses, including intended key actions. In comparison, UNICEF uses three databases to plan and store evaluations, to assess quality of decentralized evaluations, and to monitor management responses and implementation, separately. The Office of Internal Oversight Services is also faced with some limitations, as it is not able to use its automated system with two of the largest departments – the Department of Peacekeeping Operations/Department of Field Support, and the Department of Management – due to difficulties in assigning action owner rights to multiple users within one department. Hence, it collects information on the implementation of recommendations offline and manually enters the data at the central level. UNICEF and UNFPA have both consulted UNDP and the Independent Evluation Office in the past regarding how the Evaluation Resource Centre functions and the programming language used, as part of their respective efforts to improve technical solutions; the UNFPA internal recommendation tracking system has been modelled on ERC features.

17. Nonetheless, there remains room for improvement to the Evaluation Resource Centre, especially in tracking management response actions. First, the centre does not store historical reporting data on management response action implementation and cannot provide a snapshot of action status at any given point in time. The latest update on a given action replaces all prior entries, making it difficult to perform time series analyses or draw conclusions on progress made over time. Second, there are features the centre uses in other modules that have not yet been established for management response action tracking, including automatic reminders on outstanding actions and update deadlines, and making some entry fields mandatory. Currently, there is a space for comments on action achievement, but this optional space is rarely used. Furthermore, the centre categorizes key actions into 'completed', 'overdue', 'initiated', 'ongoing without a due date', 'deadline not identified' and 'no longer applicable'. While these categories are helpful for a bird's eye view of the overall status of implementation, there is no requirement for validation and supporting documentation. There are no justifications or explanations required for actions that are never completed and are no longer considered relevant for implementation. Finally, the ERC database does not keep track of, or require explanation for, actions which are simply deleted from the management response.

III. Strengthening the tracking of management response actions

18. The Independent Evaluation Office is now working to strengthen the management response action tracking system, both through revised guidance under the UNDP evaluation policy and through enhancements to the Evaluation Resource Centre.

19. *Strengthened guidance and procedures*. Over the past year, the UNDP programme and operations policies and procedures have been revised, including new programme and project management arrangements. Important additions still to come include guidelines for commissioning and responding to IEO and decentralized

evaluations. This work is underway and will be completed in 2018. The new guidance will make explicit the expectations for management response action implementation, including duration and frequency of reporting, what constitutes sufficient information, and what evidence is required to support an updated action status.

20. To support the strengthening of guidance and procedures, during the second quarter of 2018 the Independent Evaluation Office will include new technical features in the Evaluation Resource Centre. These include:

- adding time stamps to all management response inputs to allow for tracking and comparison of data over time; and
- expanding notification features so that automated email alerts are sent quarterly to bureau and country office evaluation focal points, highlighting evaluation reports without management response, key actions approaching deadline and overdue actions.

21. *Monitoring and reporting*. The Independent Evaluation Office, through its annual report on evaluation, provides information to the Board on monitoring and evaluation results. Future annual report on evaluation will include as a regular feature the tracking of management response actions.

22. The Independent Evaluation Office has now expanded its country programme evaluations, and will cover all countries prior to Board consideration and approval of new country programme documents. This change will enable the office to better assess the extent to which country offices have implemented management response actions from previous independent country programme evaluations. Additionally, the office will specifically consider the implementation of management response actions as part of the strategic plan evaluations carried out at the end of each strategic planning period.

IV. IEO plan and deadlines for guiding and tracking management response implementation

23. The Independent Evaluation Office intends to carry out a series of actions to strengthen management response tracking and assessment, as noted in the table below. It will work with UNDP management to consider other actions that can be taken, within its results-based management systems, to strengthen the management response system and processes.

Evaluation Resource Centre enhanced with new tools for tracking management response action implementation.	6/2108
New evaluation guidelines posted to the programme and operations policies and procedures.	6/2018
All thematic evaluations and independent country programme evaluations include analysis of how previous related management response actions were implemented.	1/2019
Annual reports on evaluation include a section that tracks and analyses management response action implementation.	6/2019
Analysis of management response action implementation during the four-year period is included in the evaluation of the Strategic Plan, 2018-2021.	6/2021